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**A University without Faculty: The Demise of the University of Phoenix and the Rise of the MOOCs**

The University of Phoenix is now the largest university in America, but this may soon change. This mostly online institution is facing an accreditation sanction, which could force it to lose its Pell Grants, student loans, and other federal subsidies. Not only is the stock price taking a major beating, but massive layoffs are underway.   
  
Although we should not take enjoyment in other people’s job losses, it is important to focus on what happens when higher education is taken over by a soulless corporation. As the founder of the university has become a billionaire and has just received a $5 million retirement package, the school is shedding many of its on-the-ground employees. Like many other for-profit schools, the U. of Phoenix receives most of its funding from public monies, and then uses these funds to enrich administrators and shareholders and hire an army of marketers and recruiters in order to turn mostly under-represented minority students into unemployed debt slaves, and they do this by hiring all of their faculty off of the tenure system. In many ways, this school represents the extreme logic of the online education movement: eliminate tenure for the faculty, develop questionable distance education, cater to private corporations, and make students suffer with high debt levels and bogus degrees (actually very few students ever get their degrees, and very few get their promised jobs).   
  
While online course providers like Coursera and Udacity appear to represent a much more progressive version of this high-tech education promotion, let us look at some of the statements that are coming out of the mouths of these not-for-profit, profit-seeking marketers. Here is Sebastian Thrun, founder of Udacity, from the UCLA forum (these quotes come from the [rush transcript](http://www.utotherescue.blogspot.com/2013/01/click-here-for-full-rush-transcript-of.html) on Remaking the University): “Students rarely learn listening . . . or they never learn by listening. The challenge for us is to take this new medium and really bring it to a mode where students do something and learn by doing. And if you look at the broad spectrum of online technology with what happens. It doesn’t really take long time to point to video games. And most of us look down on video games. We’ve also played them. I know there are people in this room who play angry birds. Some people do. Some people don’t admit it. Angry birds is an wonderful learning environment because you get drawn in, you solve the physics problems but the big problem is that it stops at angry birds . . . if the angry birds was good enough to get into the masters students in physics. It would be an amazing experience and you could do this at scale.” The point I want to stress here is the claim that students never learn from listening. Following this logic, most of current education is simply useless, and we should just have students take out their smart phones and play Angry Birds all day.   
  
During Thrun’s presentation at UCLA, this downgrading of traditional learning environments was connected to a downsizing of the faculty: “As we know that higher education is moving at a slower pace compared to the industry moves. We have been funded by a whole bunch of corporations that make the classes with us and there’s a number of classes launching soon on topics to be not covered in academia. If you look at the way the technology turns over, it will be 5-10 years in computer science [and] if you look at the way colleges turn over, it’s much more difficult because [with] tenure they are gonna be with us for 30 years so the national turnover rate for colleges is about 30 years. Industries it’s like 5-10 years. So there’s a disconnect between how the world changes and how colleges are able to keep up. Therefore in computer science it would be hard to find courses that teach technologies that are useful today such as IOS and all the wonderful things that they do. So the industries jumped in and funded us to build these classes.” According to this logic, since tenure requires a thirty-year commitment to the faculty, and industry and technology change at a much faster rate, we need to get rid of the secure faculty and replace them with student mentors and the latest technology.  
  
Thrun’s argument fails to recognize that faculty also develop and change, and most faculty, including his own wife, now teach without tenure. His point of view also pushes the idea that technological change is always for the better, and even if it is not good, there is no way to resist it. As I have previously argued, we need to compare online courses to our best courses and not our worst, and we have to defend and define quality education and push for more funds to be spent on small, interactive classes. However, Thrun and other MOOC celebrators appear to have a disdain for their own teaching: “But in the existing classes, the level of services are often not that great. . . .I talked to numerous instructors and you divide the time the communal time and the personal time you give back to the students in terms of advising and grading . . . you can be lucky as a student for 3 credits class to get 3 hours of personal time. Many people laugh and many say I spend 10 min/student per class and the rest I give to my TAs. Charging $1,000-$4,000 for that to me is gonna be a question going forward.” Although I have often questioned what students are actually paying for in higher education, what Thrun is really questioning is the validity and value of large, impersonal lecture classes, and on this point, we are in agreement; still the question that remains is if large online courses can really provide the quality education they advertise.   
  
At the last Regents meeting, many of these themes were continued as three computer science professors attempted to convince the UC system that online courses would make higher education “better, faster, and cheaper.” In her presentation for Coursera, Daphne Koller insisted that since students now have a very short attention span, the classic lecture has to be broken up into a series of short videos followed by an interactive question and answer system. She argued that this method paradoxically makes mass education personalized as it pushes students to constantly learn and be tested on material before they advance. This type of “drill-and-skill” education is very similar to how computer science classes are often currently taught, so it should not surprise us that all of the presenters were computer scientists. Yet, we must question whether all classes can and should be taught like a computer science course.   
  
Like the other online course providers, in order to differentiate her “product” from the “traditional” model of education, Koller had to constantly put down the current way we educate students. Thus, she derided the “sage on the stage” and the inability of most students to ask questions in their large lecture classes. She also bemoaned the fact that no one wants to read students’ tests with identical questions and answers, and so the whole grading process can be given to computers and fellow students. Once again, this argument not only degrades the value and expertise of faculty, but it also treats students as if they need to be reimagined as programmable machines and free laborers. Yes, let’s have the students’ grade each other’s paper, and while they pay for their education, let us train them to work for free.  
  
Another alarming aspect of the rhetoric of these providers is their constant reference to experimenting on students as they attempt to increase access to higher education. The idea presented at the Regents meeting is that since so many under-represented students cannot find places in the UC system, these students from underfunded high schools should be given an online alternative. Some have called this the Digital Jim Crow because wealthy students will still have access to traditional higher education, while the nonwealthy, under-represented minority students will be sent to an inferior online system. Of course this new form of educational segregation is being pushed under the progressive banner of expanding access.

Posted by [Bob Samuels](http://www.blogger.com/profile/01690556733943299895) at [11:08 AM](http://changinguniversities.blogspot.com/2013/01/a-university-without-faculty-demise-of.html)